

Free time and the pressures of employability



How does work structure our so-called “free-time”, even outside the office? And how can we break free of these bonds? In this extract from *The Refusal of Work* David Frayne talks about the philosophical basis behind anti-work politics

‘Free-time’

I begin with a simple-sounding question: at what point does a day’s work truly end? Whilst our jobs might contractually oblige us to work a certain amount of hours per day, it is clear that we do not simply step out of our workplaces and into a world of freedom. This was brought to light by Theodor Adorno in a short but poignant essay from the 1970s called ‘Free Time’. Adorno questioned the extent to which workers are truly autonomous in their time outside work, arguing that the covert aim of non-work time is simply to prepare people for the recommencement of work: free-time is not free at all, but a mere ‘continuation of the forms of profit-oriented social life’. This is because it involves activities which often have a similar quality to work (looking at screens, doing chores), but also because more alienating or exhausting forms of work produce a powerful need for recuperation. By draining people’s physical and mental energies, work that is alienating ensures that much of the worker’s non-work time is spent winding down, retreating to escapist forms of entertainment, or consuming treats which compensate for the day’s trials.

If the recuperative or compensatory activities we undertake in our free-time are often enjoyable, Adorno would ultimately argue that they are expressions of a superficial liberty. He argues that free-time is not really free at all, so long as it remains guided by the forces that people are trying to escape. He insists on the need for a distinction between free-time and the more auspicious category of true leisure. If free-time represents a mere continuation of work, then it is true leisure which represents that sweet ‘basis of unmediated life’ in which people detach from economic demands and become genuinely free for the world and its culture. Adorno argues that it is the degraded form – free-time, rather than true leisure – which prevails in affluent societies. In this degraded free-time, the so-far-defined activities performed outside employment tend to be restricted to ‘hobbies’: trifling activities performed in order to pass the meagre time which is our own. Adorno passionately rejected the term *hobby*, believing that it trivialises the value of unpaid activities. In one memorable passage, he remarked proudly:

I have no hobby. Nor that I am the kind of workaholic, who is incapable of doing anything with his time but applying himself industriously to the required task. But, as far as my activities beyond the bounds of my recognised profession are concerned, I take them all, without exception, very seriously ... Making music, listening to music, reading with all my attention, these activities are part and parcel of my life, to call them hobbies would make a mockery of them.

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to music (which we can safely assume to be classical music) are being furtively contrasted with

‘lower’, more escapist forms of culture. I will not defend this distinction here, but I will suggest that there is a great deal of contemporary significance in Adorno’s broader point about the siege on people’s time. Consider the extent to which the standard eight-hour working day fractures free-time into shards. The full-time worker experiences time as a rapid series of discrete pockets: a constantly rotating cycle of work periods and free periods, in which free-time is restricted to evenings, weekends and holidays. When free-time is fragmented in this way, the cursory hobbies that Adorno denounces may be all that we have time for. Slivers of free-time offer limited scope for engagement in more substantial self-defined activities – activities which would demand steady investments of time and energy in the form of concentration, dedication, the

building of communities, or the learning of new skills. The extreme casualty of this situation is today's archetypal rushed worker, who commutes home in the dark hours with emails still to answer, feels too drained to engage emotionally with the family, and is disinclined to do very much other than drink wine and watch TV before bed. The point here is not that drinking wine or watching TV are 'low' activities, but that the worker has been deprived of the time and energy to choose otherwise.

We, as a society, may be losing our grip on the criteria that judge an activity to be worthwhile and meaningful, even if it does not contribute directly to the project of employability or the needs of the economy

We can find a modern representation of Adorno's point about the degradation of leisure in *The Lego Movie*, released in 2014. When he is not working, the movie's protagonist – an average joe called Emmet – spends most of his time sitting on his couch, listening to the mindless pop song 'Everything is Awesome' (a sort of Lego-world equivalent of 'Happy' by Pharrell Williams), absorbing television adverts, and religiously tuning in for a catchphrase comedy called *Where Are My Pants?* Emmet showers, brushes his teeth and exercises at the exact same time every day, before hitting the same traffic jam, having the same empty conversation with his colleagues, and returning home to his best and only friend – a potted plant. If we are willing to overlook the irony that this critique is born of capitalism's very own culture industry (and what is essentially a multi-million-dollar advert for Lego), we find in *The Lego Movie* a prescient image of the administered nature of modern life.

Adorno's broader point about free-time as a continuation of work has also taken a more literal turn in the twenty-first century, where the rise of networked technologies such as laptops and smartphones has enabled work to bleed into areas of life where it was previously absent and unwelcome. Melissa Gregg has explored how, for many of today's workers, work has broken free from its temporal and spatial confinement to the working day, and now assumes the form of a nagging and ever-present 'to do' list. Through her interviews with office workers, Gregg shows how technologies such as email or instant messaging, whose best design feature is that they allow for asynchronous communication, have ultimately had the opposite effect on today's busy employees, who feel a pressure to be always present, responsive and available, whether in or out of the office. An article on the career tips website *The Grindstone* suggests that many professionals are now accustomed to the idea of being constantly on call. One

reader writes in:

Keeping up with a client in trouble or with a question via cell or Skype can turn a potential crisis into a gentle bump in the road. Clients will not tolerate an 'I was on vacation' excuse. If we do not perform, my next vacation will be in a hot bath at home with my rubber ducky.

Like their laptops, it seems that the plugged-in workers of today's high-commitment organisations must always remain on standby.

The pressures of employability

Adorno's broader concerns around the tendency of work to colonise our everyday lives have never

been as pertinent and widely applicable as they are today. This is not only because of the fragmentation of free-time and the spillage of the workday outside its usual bounds, but also because free-time is now in jeopardy for people who are between jobs, and even for younger people who have yet to set foot into the world of paid employment. This is in large part down to the new pressures of *employability*: the responsibility of each individual to improve his or her prospects by training, acquiring educational credentials, networking, learning how to project the right kind of personality, and gaining life experiences that match up with the values sought by employers. The notion of employability has risen to remarkable prominence in the early part of the twenty-first century, where it forms the lynchpin of a neoliberal political philosophy, in which the state and employers are no longer committed to, or deemed responsible for, providing citizens with lasting and secure jobs. Those politicians who champion neoliberal policies have glorified paid employment, whilst at the same time dismantling the social protections that have traditionally insulated citizens against the uncertainties of the labour market.² Within this context, the capacity of individuals to work relentlessly at their employability has come to be understood as the crux of national and individual prosperity.

The pressure to remain employable becomes more powerful when people feel that their futures are lacking in guarantees. From the 1990s onward, influential sociologists such as Richard Sennett, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman popularised the idea that capitalist societies had entered an age of insecurity. Among the most insecure are those people who are unprotected by unions, too

poorly paid to afford necessities, caught in a debt trap, or cut off from social protections like healthcare, maternity leave and a decent unemployment benefit. This insecurity could include anybody, from the undocumented migrant worker, employed illegally and paid meagre wages, to the single parent who fears losing her benefit entitlement. It also extends to those creative or academic workers who are likely to face futures filled with short-term contracts, relocations and job hunting. We could in fact argue that precariousness is the basic condition of everybody who depends on a wage for his or her survival. Engels, in his 1840s study of the working class in Manchester, reminds us that workers have long lived in fear of becoming superfluous to the requirements of the economy: '[The English proletarian] has not the slightest guarantee that his skill will in future enable him to earn even the bare necessities of life. Every commercial crisis, every whim of his master, can throw him out of work'. In today's society, growing numbers of people live in a condition of what Gorz called 'generalised insecurity', always aware on some level that they are potentially unemployed or under-employed, potentially insecure or temporary workers.

Within this social and political climate, it increasingly falls to individuals to protect themselves from unemployment and the whirlpool of low-quality, low-paid jobs. For many people, the cultivation of employability will feel like a lifelong vocation in itself: most understand that 'the possibility of selling their labour power depends on the unpaid, voluntary, unseen work they put in continually to reproduce it anew'. Employability even occupies the minds of children. I recall something a twelve-year-old lad once said to me when I was assisting with research into an anti-smoking programme that had been carried out at his school. When I asked him why he had enjoyed the programme, he said 'it will look good on my CV'. This brings us back to Adorno's conviction that even areas of life traditionally thought of as 'non-work' can be seen as extensions of the demands of paid employment. The concern here is that the enjoyment of life is increasingly being subordinated to personal cultivation for the labour market. When the development of employability is a practical necessity and a main mental preoccupation, we become increasingly devoted to doing what needs to be done rather than performing activities because they are intrinsically valuable, i.e., because they develop our personal capacities, or enrich our friendships, or simply because we love to do them. There is less and less time for those autonomous activities whose aim is simply to serve the criteria of the good, the true and the beautiful, as defined by each person.

In the 1930s, Bertrand Russell wrote a series of essays in which he lamented the

increasingly hurried and instrumental nature of modern life, recalling, in beautifully written passages, the inherent value of rest, play, contemplation and learning. His central concern was that without a considerable amount of leisure time, humans lose their sense of reverie and become cut off from many of life's pleasures: *There was formerly a capacity for light-heartedness and play which has been to some extent limited by the cult of efficiency. The modern man thinks everything ought to be done for the sake of something else, and never for its own sake.*

Russell's suggestion that people in modern societies always do one thing for the sake of another could almost be a reference to today's discourse of employability, which asks us to focus less on experiencing and enjoying the present, and think more about how the present can be mobilised in order to meet goals in the future. Aspirational individuals need to study the employability playbook, but be aware that everybody else has been studying it too. The most successful players are savvy in their ability to construct confident and coherent accounts about their past achievements, and about the relevance of these achievements to the world of employment. On the job application form, activities which were felt to be valuable in their own right are reframed in the language of employability: my charity work with the homeless must be mentioned because it has given me experience in the voluntary sector, and my hitchhike across Europe promoted because it has developed my ability to use initiative and solve problems.

Each worker is taught that he or she can always be more, and employability becomes a tragic path whose travellers declare a constant war on themselves, questioning the suitability of their personalities and achievements, never quite satisfied that they are spending their time sensibly enough.

Compliance in the discourse of employability is partly ensured by the imaginary figure of the future employer, who is always metaphorically looking over one's shoulder. Colin Cremin referred to this psychological apparition as 'the boss of it all': a generalised projection of future employers and their expectations, which regulates a person's actions and choices in the present. The boss of it all is a strict disciplinarian who is not easily impressed. He demands a constant labour of responsibility, rational decision-making, and self-management. If a worker does too many jobs in disparate areas, the boss of it all may see her as flaky, indecisive and unspecialised. But if the same worker languishes in the same job for too many years, the boss of it all may decide that she is complacent,

unambitious or too narrow in her outlook. Any young academics reading this will have been drilled to know that in academia, the boss of it all's golden rule is that prospective employees must always remain 'research active'. 'Once you're out of the game, you're out', as an old peer of mine perversely seemed to enjoy saying. Adorno made a similar allusion to the omniscient, imaginary boss in the 1950s, when he remarked on the tense conformism of the aspiring worker:

All these nervous people, from the unemployed to the public figure liable at any moment to incur the wrath of those whose investment he represents, believe that only by empathy, assiduity, serviceability, arts and dodges, by tradesmen's qualities, can they ingratiate themselves with the executive they imagine omnipresent, and soon there is no relationship that is not seen as a

'connection', no impulse not first censored as to whether it deviates from the acceptable.

If economic survival means working harder, neglecting personal interests, commuting further, or working on tomorrow's meeting at bedtime, then this is what is done. Reflecting on the rhetoric of job advertisements and graduate recruitment programmes, Costea and colleagues suggest that the discourse of employability conjures in workers a restless sense of 'endless potentiality'. Each worker is taught that he or she can always be *more*, and employability becomes a tragic path whose travellers declare a constant war on themselves, questioning the suitability of their personalities and

achievements, never quite satisfied that they are spending their time sensibly enough. Personal traits that do not fit with the image of the model employee – shyness, low moods, emotional sensitivity –

must all be smoothed over in order to present a sellable self that is inoffensive, responsible, graspable and, above all, available for hire. Employability embodies a novel power dynamic, since the personal sacrifices made in its interest are, in a certain sense, self-imposed. Unlike traditional exploitation, which is limited to clocked-in time and imposed externally, through the coercive discipline of bosses and technological control, the discipline demanded by employability is continuous and requires a constant self-policing. Employability represents a 'decentred' form of exploitation that people are forced to submit to in an almost voluntary fashion, as the spatial and temporal boundaries that previously confined exploitation to time on the work clock are dissolved.

Perhaps nowhere is the colonisation of life by work-related demands more evident and disconcerting than in the mainstream education system. Education, defined in the broadest possible sense, has the capacity to deliver a wide range of personal and public benefits: to cultivate a moral and political consciousness in the student; to foster a habit of critical thinking and contemplation; to develop in the student a taste for culture's more sublime and complex pleasures. Education might also teach the broad sets of practical skills that people require in order to become more empowered, less dependent, and able to take care of themselves, their surroundings and each other. All of these are valid and valuable goals for educators, yet the most widely accepted goal of education today is the much narrower one of stratifying the population into groups of employees, preparing and certifying young people for the assumption of a work role. We can once again return to Russell, who in the 1930s was already arguing that the modern emphasis on economic values had eclipsed the broader value of learning:

Throughout the last hundred and fifty years, men have questioned more and more vigorously the value of 'useless' knowledge, and have come increasingly to believe that the only knowledge worth having is that which is applicable to some part of the economic life of the community.

Even if the 'useless knowledge' Russell refers to has no direct economic or social utility, he still argues that it has a vital character, in so far as knowing things can often make life richer. Life is more rewarding when we take an interest, and what we choose to interest us scarcely matters from this point of view. Knowing something about the history of cinema may improve a person's enjoyment of films. Learning how to modify computers, make clothes, fix bikes, or cook Asian food each brings its own pleasures. Russell gives the weirder example of apricots. He says that apricots have always tasted slightly sweeter to him since he learned something about the origins and controversies of their cultivation in the Chinese Han Dynasty. As well as being economically useful, Russell believed, knowledge could be an inherent part of the *joie de vivre* and a source of mental delight in itself.

Russell is among a number of radical authors who have defended the value of a broad and general education, rather than a narrower one, geared towards the preparation and certification of students for work. Another notable supporter of this argument was Erich Fromm, who made an illuminating distinction between learning in the 'having' mode and learning in the 'being' mode. The pressures of employability may be encouraging students to approach their learning in the first

of Fromm's modes.

Students who learn in the having mode will diligently memorise the key points from a lecture, but 'the content does not become part of their own individual system of thought, enriching and widening it'.

Their relationship with learning is an acquisitive one: they seek to possess rather than absorb and integrate knowledge, to the ends of passing examinations and securing a qualification. Knowledge is retained, but students do not become involved in their learning or use it to address their own sets of problems. The main context of learning is anxiety. This contrasts with those students who learn in the more lively 'being' mode. Unlike the acquisitive students, these students become genuinely occupied

with their learning: 'What they listen to stimulates their own thinking processes. New questions, new ideas, new perspectives arise in their minds. Their listening is an alive process'.

For both Fromm and Russell alike, it seems that the ultimate goal of education should not be to furnish students with this or that nugget of knowledge, but to foster in them a contemplative habit of mind. Education should inspire in the student a broad and humane outlook on life in general: *What is needed is not this or that specific piece of information, but such knowledge as inspires a conception of the ends of human life as a whole: art and history, acquaintance with the lives of heroic individuals, and some understanding of the strangely accidental and ephemeral position of man in the cosmos – all this touched with an emotion of pride in what is distinctively human, the power to see and know, to feel magnanimously and to think with understanding.*

At present, the kind of broad education that Russell describes tends to be closeted in universities, or confined to the more privileged members of society – groups of people who can study freely because they are unrestricted by the urgent need to make a living. The pressures of today's labour market mean that few people who would be inclined actually manage to enjoy lives in which intellectual development and cultural activities figure as integrated, lifelong pleasures. The work ethic, along with cuts to arts budgets (and unemployment benefits, which bohemians have historically used as a sort of unofficial arts budget) have also made it less feasible for cultural creators to wing it for a few years in order to hone their craft and perhaps find a way to make a living from it.

As they leave the bosom of the university, many students are also realising that graduates are no longer free from the kinds of risks and uncertainties previously thought to be the preserve of low-paid, low-skilled workers. This climate of uncertainty puts a strong premium on the ability of students to take an active approach to their employability and think in practical, instrumental ways about how to secure their futures. Furthermore, the student debt caused by rising tuition fees and the abolition of student grants may be tying young people to a need to earn, long before they have had a chance to reflect on the trade-off between the benefits of a good income and the sacrifices of work. Predictions suggest that in the UK, students who started courses in 2011 will have an average debt of £23,000 by the time they graduate, with this figure rising to as much as £53,000 for 2012 entrants in England, given the latest rise in tuition fees. Berardi compares the student loan to Faust's pact with the devil. In exchange for knowledge and credentials, students agree to a debt that will end up regulating their actions and shackling them to a future obligation to work. Like the competitive graduate, the indebted graduate is more easily cajoled into doing more for less, making him ideal fodder for the thousands of unpaid internships available in today's labour market, many of which offer no guarantee of skills development or future employment.

Ultimately, the pressures of employability are bringing to fruition Max Horkheimer's lamentation on the

'loss of interiority' in advanced capitalist societies: societies in which 'the wings of the imagination have been clipped too soon', as individuals are increasingly forced to adopt a more practical and instrumental orientation to the world and others. A side effect of this loss of interiority is that we, as a society, may be losing our grip on the criteria that judge an activity to be worthwhile and meaningful, even if it does not contribute directly to the project of employability or the needs of the economy. Gorz poses the question: 'When am I truly myself, that is, not a tool or the product of outside powers and influences, but rather the originator of my acts, thoughts, feelings, values?'. In a society where non-work is often merely an extension of work – time for recuperating, consuming anaesthetising products and entertainment, or sensibly cultivating one's employability – I contend that this question has become worryingly difficult to answer.

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